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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, members of couples are similar in age, race, class, appearance and education. But within that common background, men tend to marry women slightly below themselves, a phenomenon known in sociology as the marriage gradient. To determine the extent to which students are comfortable with unequal relationships and traditional and untraditional equalities, 277 predominantly white, middle and upper middle class students (140 male, 137 female), between the ages of 18-23, completed an attitude questionnaire. Two hypothetical situations were presented in which a first spouse was older, taller, more intelligent and richer, and a second was younger, shorter, less intelligent, etc. Students rated their degree of comfort with each spouse on a Likert-type scale and then explained their rating. An analysis of the results showed that students were most comfortable with the traditional inequalities of the mating gradient. College men wanted women who were shorter and better looking than themselves; however, they wanted similarity in earnings, intelligence, age, and education. Women wanted spouses who earned more, were older, better educated, and taller. Exchange theory, social comparison, and role adjustment are possible explanations of why individuals hold to potentially detrimental traditional attitudes. (BL)

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The Mating Gradient: Alive and Well on the College Campus

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The research supporting Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954) indicates that if one compares oneself to someone better, then one feels inferior, whereas if one compares oneself with someone worse, one feels superior (Morse & Gergen, 1981). Although feeling superior might be expected to be pleasant, feeling inferior would be expected to be unpleasant; thus, to meet the needs of both partners in a relationship, a general equality between partners would seem desirable. Choosing someone similar to oneself might well be one way of helping to establish an equal relationship, perceived as equitable by both partners. As we know, the best single predictor of attraction is perceived similarity.

An examination of the research on mates shows that members of couples are highly similar in age, race, educational level, social status, religion, intelligence, and physical characteristics of height and eye color (Warren, 1966). As Seidenberg has said, "...with repetitive monotony, well known to the sociologist, we 'just happen' to fall in love with those in the same social class, educational level, financial bracket, religion, color, political beliefs, nationality, size, mannerisms, intelligence, and looks as ourselves. Not exactly alike, but within a range which does not disprove the rule... There is a sociological mating machine working night and day..." (Seidenberg, 1973, p. 17).

It would seem at first glance that we literally wish to see "eye to eye" with those close to us. However, in real life, there is a systematic difference in the way spouses "stack up." As Bernard (1973) has observed, people do tend to marry within the same general class

and cultural background; there is 'homogamy.' But within that common background, men tend to marry women slightly below themselves in such measurable items as age, education, occupation, and so forth. In the past at least, husbands have been systematically "superior" to their wives, a phenomenon known in sociology as the marriage gradient.

Perceptions of inequality in relationships have been found to be a factor in break-ups (Wrightsman & Deaux, 1981, Ch. 6), and we all know that the divorce rate is much higher than it was in the 60's. Perhaps today the traditional mating gradient is seen as undesirable or inequitable.

The present study was designed to determine the extent to which today's college students would feel comfortable with unequal relationships, and to determine whether traditional and nontraditional inequalities would elicit the same response.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 140 male and 137 female undergraduate volunteers. The subjects were all between the ages of 18 and 23, almost exclusively white, and from middle or upper middle class backgrounds.

Measures

Attitudes toward the mating gradient were measured by presenting the following situation: "Assume that you are 25 years old or older. Assume that your spouse or lover is five years older, four inches taller, and more intelligent than you are. S/He is better educated and earns $5,000 more per year than you do. How would you feel about this situation?" Answers ranged from 1 (extremely

uncomfortable) to 7 (extremely pleased). The ratings were followed by the question, "Why would you feel this way?" They were then presented with the reverse situation, in which the spouse/lover was five years younger, four inches shorter, etc., and asked how they would feel about that situation and why. The questions and responses were written.

Procedures

The questionnaires were administered to friends and acquaintances by 26 male and 26 female undergraduates as part of an assignment for a class discussion. Subjects remained anonymous. They were informed that their answers would be combined with the answers of others as the basis for a discussion in a psychology class, and that these responses might be used for research purposes.

RESULTS

A two-factor analysis of variance for the effects of sex of questioner and sex of respondent indicated that when the self was superior, men were pleased ($\bar{X}$ = 4.35) and women were uncomfortable ($\bar{X}$ = 2.84), $F(1,273) = 94.28$, $p < .001$. Conversely, when the other was superior, women were pleased ($\bar{X}$ = 4.69) and men were uncomfortable ($\bar{X}$ = 3.49), $F(1,273) = 41.03$, $p < .001$. There were no significant interactions with sex of questioner.

Chi-square analyses indicate that when there were sex differences in reasons given for feeling pleased or uncomfortable in the two situations, these differences were all in the traditional direction. When the other was superior, women were more likely than men to say that they were pleased because they like the traditional roles, being taken care of, or personal rewards such as learning, identifica-

tion with the other, pride in the other, etc. Women were more likely to specifically mention the man's superior age, height, and intelligence as desirable characteristics. There were no reasons for being pleased with a superior other that were mentioned more frequently by men, but men more frequently than women said that they were uncomfortable because the role was counter to tradition or because of earning less or being shorter. When the self was superior, men were more likely to say they were pleased because the role was traditional, because they would be superior or dominant, or because of being taller. They were also more likely to say they were pleased without giving any reason at all. There were no reasons for being pleased with superiority that were mentioned more frequently by women. There were no reasons for being uncomfortable with superiority that were mentioned more frequently by men. Women were more likely to say they would be uncomfortable as the superior partner because of traditional roles, because the other person would be displeased or unhappy, or because the respondent herself would not want to feel superior or dominant. Women were more likely to make explicit negative mention of age, height, intelligence, and education in the self-superior condition. (See Table 1).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Students believe that the last 20 years have brought about great changes in relationships between the sexes. In particular, they are likely to assert that men and women are now more equal partners than they were in the past. This study indicates that, although egalitarian rhetoric is there, in their most intimate relationships both sexes are still more comfortable with the traditional inequalities.

One might argue that this study simply indicates that given a relationship that is defined as unequal, people are able to live comfortably with it if they are not deviant from the society at large. They might actually prefer equality, given the opportunity to say so. In fact, subsequent work by the authors (Sholley & Makosky, 1983) indicates that college men in rating their ideal mates did want women who are shorter and better looking than themselves, but they wanted similarity in earnings, intelligence, age and education. The women, on the other hand, wanted their ideal spouses to earn more, be older, better educated and taller. College students not only are comfortable with the mating gradient, they actually prefer it.

Why should this be so? One possible explanation is that at some level, they want to make their future role adjustments easier. Jesse Bernard has said, "In our society, the husband is assigned a superior status. It helps if he actually is somewhat superior in ways--in height, for example, or age or education or occupation--for such superiority, however slight, makes it easier for both partners to conform to the structural imperatives. The girl wants to be able to 'look up' to her husband, and he, of course, wants her to." (Bernard, 1973, p. 35).

Exchange theory allows not only for the exchange of similar rewards, but also for the exchange of dissimilar rewards. The general similarities observed in members of couples would show that couples, at least to some extent, do exchange similar rewards. The observed dissimilarities, however, would indicate that there are important and predictable complementary exchanges going on in couples as well.

Raven and Rubin (1983) conclude that similarity in status and values is necessary for initial attraction and the beginning of a relationship, but that complementary needs are necessary for the relationship to continue. In line with this assumption of complementarity, the findings of Harrison and Saeed (1977) make sense: these researchers examined ads in lonely-hearts columns, looking at what was offered and what was asked for, and we can conclude that a "fair exchange" in male/female pairs is the women's physical attractiveness for the man's financial security. Coombs and Kenkel (1966) in a study of computer matching at a dance, found that women were attracted to status and men were attracted by appearance. Similarly, Hoyt & Hudson (1981) document several sex differences in the ranking of personal characteristics valued in mates: ambition/industriousness, education/intelligence, favorable social status, and good financial prospects were more highly valued by women, whereas good looks were more highly valued by men. It may be that the variables tapped in the present study reflect primarily the man's side of the exchange, and did not really tap the resources that a woman is expected to contribute to the relationship.

Another feasible explanation is that for spouses, the important social comparisons are not just between the two of them, but also between themselves as a couple and other couples. In that case, having a superior spouse would be more to the advantage of the women than the men. As Seidenberg has said, "...the basic fact, at least in middle-class living, is that the economic and social status of the family largely hinges on the position, decisions, and convictions of the male...a husband's success is good for everyone; everyone in the family benefits. A woman's success may bring disharmony, and social

condemnation, especially if she outshines her husband." (1973, pp. 63-64). Today's college students may still be operating according to these assumptions. Women may want to improve their status in a socially accepted way through marriage to men of importance, wealth, or potential, whereas men expect their status to be enhanced primarily by the attractiveness of their women (e.g., Sigall & Landy, 1973). Certainly those women whose status would be enhanced least by marrying superior men--e.g., women Ph.D.'s and other successful women--are more likely than their male peers or any other group of women to be never married (e.g., Cuca, 1976; Bernard, 1972 & 1981; Makosky & Roach, 1981).

Many researchers have commented on the toll that the traditional marriage takes on both women (Bernard, 1972, 1981) and men (Seidenberg, 1973). It has been suggested (Bernard, 1981) that women's sense of inferiority results from continued low status aggravated by their position of subordination. As long as women and men want marriages that are in line with the mating gradient, we will continue to have women setting themselves up for day-to-day negative comparisons and feelings of inferiority. We will continue to have men who are cut off from a large number of potentially desirable spouses. Nevertheless, at the present time, the mating gradient <u>is</u> alive and well on the college campus.

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Table 1

Reasons for Feelings Which Chi-Square Analyses Indicate are More Frequent for One Sex Than for the Other.

	Mentioned More Frequently	p
Other Superior, Why Pleased		
explicit mention of traditional roles, social expectations, masculinity/feminity	females	.0001
being taken care of, security, "The Good Life"	females	.01
personal rewards: learning, growth, challenge identification with the other, pride in the other	females	.001
age	females	.01
height	females	.001
intelligence	females	.01
Other Superior, Why Neutral		
height	females	.05
Other Superior: Why Uncomfortable		
explicit mention of traditional roles, social expectations, masculinity/feminity	males	.0001
height	males	.0001
money	males	.01
Self Superior, Why Pleased		
explicit mention of traditional roles, social expectations, masculinity/feminity	males	.001
respondent feels superior, dominant	males	.05
height	males	.05
no reason given	males	.05
Self Superior, Why Neutral		
money	females	.05
Self Superior, Why Uncomfortable		
explicit mention of traditional roles, social expectations, masculinity/feminity	females	.001
other person would be displeased, unhappy, have other negative feelings	females	.01
respondent feels superior, dominant	females	.001
age	females	.01
height	females	.0001
intelligence	females	.05
education	females	.05